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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on using the media to reach the public and, through the public, politicians regarding literacy issues. The paper gives some tips gleaned from recent convention symposia about attracting the audience, such as involving students, teachers, or both in interviewing authors, announcing community calendars about literacy events, sharing success stories, having radio call-ins, and localizing national programs. It also lists some key points on how to write a one-page summary of a story to be covered in the media. The paper comments on some recent newspaper articles about education and notes that writing for the media can be hard work. It states that many times opinion pieces are returned and not used, but that one way to extend the effort to reach politicians is by encouraging everyone who writes an article for a professional journal to write the same article for the popular media. The paper asks whether literacy researchers and educators are ready, willing, and able to provide the answers sought by politicians and the public. (NKA)

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Reaching Politicians Through the Media.

by Allen Berger

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Reaching Politicians Through the Media

An Invited Commentary

Allen Berger
Miami University

Note: After reading this article, please visit the transcript of the discussion forum to view readers' comments.

> There may be some truth, though, in the contention that journalists have not done a good job. . . . Few reporters are comfortable with statistics. . . . Also, speed is essential in daily reporting, and we do far too much of our analysis on the fly. We do not come back to a topic for deeper consideration nearly often enough. Compounding the problem, newspapers rarely provide enough space in which to analyze the nuances of a huge study. So, at even the best papers, complex stories on all topics become oversimplifed. . . .
>
> All of this said, education itself has shortcomings that it would be irresponsible for the media to ignore.
>
> -- *Aleta Watson,* Phi Delta Kappan, *June 1998*

In an article on literacy and politics that appeared earlier this year in *Reading Online,* I made the point that educators and politicians speak different languages and read different publications. This second article focuses on using the media to reach the public and, through the public, politicians. I've written on similar topics before (see, for example, Berger, 1997a, 1997b), but the tips that follow come from symposia I developed for conventions of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Speakers from the radio, television, and newspaper worlds informed the audiences of ways to reach out and tell their stories in their own communities.

The symposium at the IRA convention in Orlando, Florida, USA, in 1998 was called "Mending Fences with the Media." In describing the symposium in a convention roundup in the IRA newspaper, *Reading Today,* senior editor Matt Freeman wrote:

> Berger assembled a panel that included representatives from radio and television stations and the newspaper in Orlando. . . . The session focused on practical tips from all the presenters on how best to deal with various types of media. In addition to nuts-and-bolts concerns such as deadlines, some presenters talked about the positive results of establishing long-term relationships with certain media people. Annetta Wilson, of WKMG-CBS TV in Orlando, said that despite the stereotype, positive news is welcome because people like hearing it. She recommended finding out which reporters and editors work on issues you are involved in, making friends with them, and providing them with information they need -- in other words, becoming a source for them.
>
> "It takes a little homework, but it can be done. It takes a little creative thinking, but you're educators. You know how to do that," Wilson concluded.

Annetta's comments were echoed by Michael Lafferty, education editor, *The Orlando Sentinel.* He gave seven tips:

1. Know your newspaper
2. Know people at your newspaper (and establish relationships)
3. Be brief (e-mail is good)
4. Be discerning (have a news hook)
5. Be flexible (maybe what you have is more appropriate as a photo rather than a news story)

6. Don't use jargon
7. Don't be negative about "bad" news -- be truthful

He reminded those in the audience that their professional lives depended on a literate population.

Terry Rensel, program director of WUCF-FM radio in Orlando, told the audience that radio stations are required to fill various spots for public affairs and public service. He suggested that we could arrange to have personalities (famous and less so) testify on behalf of books; provide intriguing excerpts from stories and books; give tips on helping children be better writers and readers; and get help on how to present ideas from experts at our local radio stations or college or university stations.

Other tips shared during the symposium included involving students, teachers, or both in interviewing authors, announcing community calendars about literacy events, sharing success stories, having radio call-ins, and localizing national programs ("think globally, act locally").

"Telling Our Stories Through the Media" was the title of the session I put together for the NCTE conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, in Spring 1999. Mark Curnutte, a feature writer for *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* reminded educators that there is much competition and urged us to be personal and friendly. He suggested informing reporters of events several weeks ahead of time and calling at a good time -- not near deadlines or at day's end.

"The best way to get your idea into the paper, or the best way to at least get consideration," Curnutte advised, "is to work with a reporter with whom you have established some sort of professional relationship." If you don't know a reporter, "ask people in the college's communications office, or ask a secretary in the superintendent's office." Another, and perhaps better, way is to read the newspaper and pick out "the reporter or reporters whose work you respect and reporters who appear to write about stories similar in subject matter to yours." Then phone and set up a meeting to see the reporter, mention the story you enjoyed, and have handy a one-page summary of the story that you hope will appear. "Be ready to give the reporter names and phone numbers after having obtained permission from potential sources," Curnutte concluded.

The representatives from radio and television said that much of what Mark Curnutte said applied to their media as well. Mike Martini of WVXU radio in Cincinnati said that public radio can do in-depth stories three to four minutes in length. Know the stations in your area (even if many stations are owned by one company), and contact reporters to ask if you can share your idea, and in what form. Don't hesitate, Martini said, to follow up with a thank you call.

Echoing these comments was Joe Webb, WCPO-TV, Cincinnati, who spoke of television's need for the visual element. When you talk with a TV reporter, don't be vague and say, for example, that you would like publicity for an event or about some broad issue. Be helpful and tell about specific things that might be of interest to television viewers. He also suggested involving students by asking for their suggestions. "Be polite and persistent with media people," Joe said, adding, "Remember, many probably were teachers before getting into radio, television, or newspapers."

If you plan to write a one-page summary of the story you hope will be covered in the media, remember a few key points:

- Provide a brief description of the event.
- Remember the 5 Ws: Who? What? When? Where? Why?
- Put the sentences with the most important information first.
- Be aware of different deadlines for radio, television, and newspapers.
- Have information about your school or organization handy.
- Include a name and daytime phone number where you can be reached.

I was on my way home after writing these words, and I stopped to pick up a copy of the *New York Times.* There on the editorial page of the August 23rd edition was a column-long piece titled "Money Can't Buy Good Teachers." From that article the public and politicians will learn that it is foolish to consider "spending hundreds of millions of dollars on recruiting and training" teachers, and that "money may attract people into teaching, but the odds are they will be badly trained." The writer, John Merrow, damns the profession through

his use and misuse of facts and anecdotes (e.g., "I've met several certified science teachers who tried to apply for jobs in Oakland but couldn't get interviews.") Letters to the editor, I'm sure, will clarify some of his misconceptions, but we in education should be proactive as well as reactive: we should be writing articles for the Merrows of the world to react to, not just the other way around. And the articles we write should appear in the *New York Times* and other influential publications.

The next morning I read a more positive view in the Today's Debate feature in *USA Today*. One side of the debate was presented in a piece titled "Luring Good Teachers to Poor Schools Takes Money, Creativity: Raises, Smaller Classes among the Incentives Being Developed" (the opposing view's headline was "Accountability Is Key to Reform: More Resources Won't Rescue Flawed System").

What I'm saying is that there is tremendous interest among politicians and the public not just in money, sex, and religion, but also in education. There is no question in my mind that many educators know how to reach the public and, through them, politicians. But although we have the basic know-how, do we have the will?

The National Reading Conference, an organization of about 450 literacy researchers of which I am a long-time member, recently passed a motion "to respond to the current political climate related to literacy" by forming two committees. I immediately e-mailed each committee chair to obtain information to include in this commentary. One chair responded and informed me that work is in progress but "there's nothing to report now."

To practice what I preach, or teach, I try to write a couple of articles for newspapers each year. The most recent one, "As School Year Begins, Make a Promise to Improve Literacy," has appeared this month in newspapers in Ohio and elsewhere. Let me share with you, in brief, how that particular piece developed, from conception to its reaching the public.

I thought it would be nice to share my ideas about changes in literacy education over the past few decades, so I first wrote an article that turned out to be more than 40 pages long. I thought there might be public interest in the piece, so I sent it to an influential major periodical. When it was returned, I sent it to another influential periodical (knowing that it was too long but pointing out in an accompanying letter that it could be separated into two articles). When I received my article back -- or rather, when I received a rejection letter in the postage-paid, self-addressed envelope I had provided -- I sent the piece out to a few more places, with the same results. Although it is disappointing to have your writing returned, it is par for the course. It is not unusual to make several fruitless attempts at publication before finally finding a venue, and even then the original manuscript may take on a completely new and unexpected form. So, undaunted, I kept sending out my article.

Some of the people who replied took the time to make some helpful comments. One said the article should be expanded into a book. Another said that pages 6 through 9 (of my 40+-page manuscript) would make a terrific op/ed. So I began developing an opinion/editorial piece, and that's what's seen the light of day. (And I found a good use for the original manuscript, too -- it has become the basis of "What I Learned from Four Decades of Teaching Reading and Writing," a presentation scheduled for the November 1999 NCTE convention in Denver.)

Writing for the media can be hard work. Producing three double-spaced pages (the typical 700-word op/ed) takes me about 20 hours from beginning to end. And if you plan to have a media session at a convention, figure on spending many hours arranging it. For example, the how-to-do-it symposium for the IRA convention and the similar session for the NCTE conference took countless hours to plan and organize. For the former, I must have made fifty phone calls to media in Orlando. (I made so many phone calls to Orlando, I had to explain to my boss that I wasn't trying to reach Mickey or Goofy.) It is hard to find the right person to talk to. Then, when you reach that person, you need to explain things that you and I may take for granted. We know what the International Reading Association is, that it has about 90,000 members in 99 countries, and so on. But the person you're speaking to has never heard of the International Reading Association. Or the National Council of Teachers of English.

Be sure to begin very early. I almost succeeded in having a representative from the Nickelodeon cable television network on the program, but I began my phone calls and faxes too late. Even when you're arranging a program involving radio, television, and newspapers in your own hometown, begin early. The

NCTE conference was in nearby Cincinnati, but I still had to make countless phone calls to the media, running into rules and regulations that forbid personalities at some television stations from making appearances and confronting the ever-present possibility of losing a confirmed speaker at the final minute because of a breaking news story. But, judging from the enthusiasm, the presentations are well worth it for the media participants as well as the audiences.

Reaching politicians and the public through the media can be scary: one tiny misstep or misinterpretation and you'll hear about it in print or letters. Yet, as I've said elsewhere, we need to follow our consciences. One way to extend our efforts to reach politicians is by encouraging everyone who writes an article for a professional publication to write the same article for the popular media. And the time to do so is now.

It should come as no surprise that politicians are in favor of education -- indeed, for many politicians and their constituents, it is a top priority. Where will politicians and the public learn about reading and writing? Through the popular media. In the August 30 issue of *U. S. News & World Report,* Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush are pictured reading to children in the lead article, "The Three R's and the Big P: Are Political Solutions Getting Good Grades or Flunking in the Classroom?" (online document). In coming months there will be more such articles, more questions. But the biggest question of all is whether literacy researchers and educators are ready, willing, and able to provide the answers sought by politicians and the public.

Author's Note: My appreciation to undergraduate and graduate students in my course, Advanced Reading Instruction, for reading this commentary and writing their views before its publication. *--Allen Berger, September 3, 1999*

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Back to top

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